DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 061 608 EA 004 196

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TITLE School Board Incumbent Defeat in Partisan Elections.
PUB DATE 4 Apr 72
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting. (57th, Chicago, Illinois, April 3-7. 1972)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Board Administrator Relationship; Board Candidates; *Boards of Education; Data Analysis; *Education; *Educational Research; Political Influences; *Politics; Speeches; *Superintendents

ABSTRACT

This speech presents the results of a study that examined whether a phenomenon previously observed in nonpartisan school board elections is also true of partisan school board elections. Previous studies had shown that school board incumbent defeat in nonpartisan elections is related to involuntary superintendent turnover. The study investigated that relationship in partisan elections. One hundred and eighty-one Pennsylvania districts where board members are elected as Republicans or as Democrats were studied and data were subjected to chi-square analysis. Five hypotheses were tested to determine if the partisan phenomenon changed this relationship. Based on these data, partisanism did not change this political process in the politics of local school districts. (Author/JF)

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ED 061608

Presented at AERA
April 4, 1972

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SCHOOL BOARD INCUMBENT DEFEAT IN PARTISON ELECTIONS*

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Introduction

One need no longer begin a paper on the politics of education by pointing out that education is a political process. That point now seems clearly established, but the nature of that political activity still remains unclearly defined. The present paper attempts to adjust that focus somewhat. While investigating local school politics, the actual purpose of this investigation was to determine how partison politics affects the nature of educational politics usually played in non-partison arenas. This research investigated a well-established phenomenon in the non-partison politics of education as it operated in Pennsylvania, a state electing school board members within the normal partison political process at regular primary and general elections by casting votes for Democrat, Republican or independent candidates.

Theoretical Background

It is hardly a startling revelation that local school boards exercise considerable power in educational decision-making. But the process of this exercise of power has generally been held to be non-political. A year long participant observer study[1] of a school board showed this process to

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EA 004 196

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be generally non-partison but far from non-political. Three variables emerged as extremely interesting in this case: 1) incumbent school board defeat, 2) superintendent-board conflict, 3) involuntary superintendent turn-over. About this same time Callahan[2] noted the relationship between the power of the board, the vulnerability of the superintendent and superintendent turn-over. Four years later another study[3] confirmed the relationship between incumbent defeat and involuntary superintendent turn-over at the .001 confidence level. The field study conducted in the Mid West and the validation study done on the West Coast that confirmed the field data, both investigated school boards elected on a non-partison bases. The theoretical nature of that process and the expanded case study are reported in Politics, Power and Policy: The Study of a Local School Board.[4] Iannacconi and Lutz felt the process they described so compelling that they entitled the incumbent defeat-superintendent turn-over chapter "Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsen,"[5] vaguely interpreted, "It is too late--you have been found deficient--your reign is over! In other words, incumbent school board defeat is the handwriting on the wall, usually seen to late. It signals that the operation of the schools has been found wanting by the public and the superintendent is very likely to be relieved of his duties. While the correlation is not 1.0, the relationships is certainly compelling.

Based upon their findings, Iannacconi and Lutz speculated that the non-partison nature of school politics might contribute to the long delay between social change and educational policy reform and thus to the relationship between incumbent defeat and superintendent turn-over. The question of whether placing education clearly within the partison political

arena might improve its responsiveness to society's demands can be given a conditional and theoretical yes. If so, then one would expect to find some difference in the incumbent defeat and superintendent turn-over relationship in states electing school board members on a partison basis. This study investigated that possibility.[6]

It was hypothesized that the partison nature of school board elections in Pennsylvania would change the relationship in several ways. For instance, if one's entire party is swept out resulting in an incumbent school board member's defeat, one could hardly reason that the entire ticket, including state candidates lost because of dissatisfaction with local school policy. Thus this situation should not be related to superintendent turn-over. This type of reasoning resulted in the following hypotheses:

H 1. In partison, general elections in Pennsylvania, more school board candidates win when their party wins than when their party loses.

H 2. The defeat of an incumbent school board member in Pennsylvania's partison general election is not necessarily reflective of community dissatisfaction with the school board and its policy to the degree that involuntary turn-over results:

H 2 a. The defeat of a renominated incumbent school board member, accompanied by the defeat of the rest of the incumbent's party, will not signal involuntary superintendent turn-over within three years.

H 2 b. The defeat of an incumbent school board member in a primary election will signal involuntary superintendent turn-over within three years.

H 2 c. The defeat of a renominated incumbent school board member in the partison general election accompanied by a victory of the rest of the incumbent's party will be the strongest indicator of involuntary superintendent turn-over within three years.

Support for hypothesis one would lend greater support to the speculation that hypotheses two might be correct. Hypothesis two if confirmed would be explained in some detail if hypotheses 2a, 2b and 2c were confirmed, describing how partison politics might effect school board member incumbent defeat. We speculated that partison politicians (particulary at the bottom of the ticket) lose or win because their part wins or loses. Therefore, in a partison election a school board member's defeat would not be related to voter dissatisfaction with local school policy and would not likely result in the dismissal (either overtly or covertly) of the superintendent. The exception would be when an incumbent is defeated in a primary or even more likely when he is nominated in the primary, his party wins in the general election, but he is personally defeated by a member of the losing party.

Research Procedures

The sample of school districts to test the above hypotheses was selected from the nine-man school board districts in Pennsylvania. All candidates for these boards had to be nominated in their party's primary election. Elections are held during odd years and each board is elected for a six year term in a general election. As a result, board members serve overlapping terms and it would take at least six years to replace an entire board. Useable data were available from 192 districts to test hypothesis

1.0 and from 165 districts to test hypotheses 2.0, 2a, 2b, and 2c. School districts were randomly selected from those districts meeting the election criteria required and the final samples were generally representative of the state as a whole with regard to size catagories, urban-rural, and geographical distribution.

All districts selected were administered by a superintendent of schools. Districts administered by supervising principals and responsible to county superintendents were eliminated from the study. Each of the superintendents were operating within a four year term that began July 1, 1966 and expired July 1, 1970, or were filling unexpired terms of superintendents retired, voluntarily moved to other positions or victims of involuntary superintendent turnover. Therefore, any superintendent replaced during this four year period was of interest to this study. As we intended to test hypotheses related to superintendent turnover following the three year period of incumbent defeat, the general elections of November 7, 1967 were examined for the necessary election data. Superintendent involuntary turnover occurring between December 4, 1967 (as the board elected in the November 7 election was constituted officially on December 4, 1967), and December 4, 1970 provided the involuntary turnover data. This period included July 1, 1970, the date on which all superintendents in Pennsylvania re-employed for the following four year period officially signed their new contracts.

In order to test hypothesis one, data concerning party victory were needed. Party victory was operationally defined as a Party having won more than one-half of all the offices appearing on the ballot. These and other election data were collected from local newspaper accounts. Where such data were impossible to obtain from newspaper accounts, the specific

school district was called to obtain the information.

Data regarding the general nature of superintendent turnover was collected at the Pennsylvania State Department of Education. Data related to the specific nature of turnover (voluntary or involuntary) were collected through questionnaires sent to the superintendents who succeeded in the office. Where questionnaires were not returned, phone calls were placed to obtain the information. The specific questionnaire is available in the original dissertation.[8]

All data were analyzed with 2x2 chi square contingency tables using the yates correction. A chi square within .05 or less confidence level was required in order to reject the null version of all hypotheses.

Data Analyses

In order to discover how partisonism might effect educational politics, we decided to test the school board incumbent defeat--involuntary superintendent turnover theory (developed in non-partison political environments) in Pennsylvania school districts where board members are elected in partison elections. The following is the analysis of null hypotheses related to that theory.

H 1. There is no difference in the number of school board candidates elected when their party wins as compared with candidates elected whose party loses .

TABLE I

Candidate Winning-Losing Related to Party Victory

		candidate wins	candidate loses	
party	wins	775	132	(907)
	loses	132	775	(907)
		(907)	(907)	N - 1814

X^2 = 10,827 significant at the .001 level.

H 2. In general partison elections of school board members, incumbent defeat will have no relationship to involuntary superintendent turnover.

TABLE II

General Election Incumbent Defeat and
Involuntary Superintendent Turnover

		Involuntary Turnover: yes	Involuntary Turnover: no	
Incumbent Defeat	yes	10	24	(34)
	no	7	61	(68)
		(17)	(85)	N = 102*

X^2 = 4.64 significant at the .05 level

It should be noted, however, that when districts where incumbents lost in primary elections were included as non-incumbent losing districts there was no significance. This phenomenon will be discussed later.

H 2 a. School board incumbent defeat accompanied by party defeat will not be followed by involuntary superintendent turnover. (The null hypotheses could not be rejected and thus hypotheses seems to be supported.)

H 2 b. There is no relationship between primary election defeat of an incumbent school board member and involuntary superintendent turnovers.

TABLE III

Primary Election Incumbent Defeat and
Involuntary Superintendent Turnover

		Involuntary Turnover: yes	Involuntary Turnover: no	
Incumbent Defeat	yes	19	40	(59)
	no	17	87	(104)
		(36)	(127)	N = 163

X^2 = 4.77 significant at the .05 level

*Excluding districts where incumbent defeat occured in the primary.

H 2 c. There is no relationship between involuntary turnover and the defeat of an incumbent school board member while the incumbents party wins the election. (The null hypotheses could not be rejected) Actually this was theoretically predicted as the strongest relationship. Failure to obtain any significance will be discussed later.

H 2 d. An additional hypotheses was formulated after data collection began. This omitted reference to the partison nature of the election and catagories of incumbent defeat (e.g., party losing or wining; loss in general or primary election) stating simply that incumbent defeat, regardless of catagory will be related to involuntary turnover. The following data tested that notion.

TABLE IV

Incumbent Defeat (All Catagories)
And Involuntary Superintendent Turnover

		Involuntary Turnover		
		yes	no	
Incumbent Defeat	yes	29	64	(93)
	no	7	61	(68)
		(36)	(125)	N = 161

X^2 = 9.60 significant at the .01

Discussion and Implications

There is clearly some relationship between partisonship and school board member elections. This relationship was demonstrated at the .001 level when it was shown that there is a strong relationship between a school board member's victory and the victory of his party. In Pennsylvania's partison elections in areas where the Democratic party is strong, (more than one

half of the candidates on their ticket wins election), Democrats tend to win the school board seats and visa versa. This phenomenon supports Bonfield and Wilson's notion about the nature of partison vs nonpartison elections in general. But here the influence of partisonism seems to end.

Hypothesis two demonstrated that the relationship between school board member incumbent defeat in general partison elections and involuntary turnover, demonstrated earlier in non-partison school elections also exists in partison elections in Pennsylvania.

Given that there is a close relationship in partison elections of the school board member's election and his party's victory (demonstrated in hypotheses one) then one would expect that the reverse would be true. If the party loses, thus causing an incumbent to lose, than involuntary superintendent turnover would not be related to that event. We reason that in nonpartison districts incumbent defeat generally results from public dissatisfaction with the school policy set by the incumbent board. But in partison elections incumbent defeat in the lower part of the ticket (school board members for example) follows dissatisfaction with larger party policy and thus should not affect superintendent turnover. This appears to be so as demonstrated in hypotheses 2a.

Some other things should then follow. Defeat of an incumbent in the primary elections should be more powerfully related to involuntary superintendent turnover than the general incumbent defeat catagory. In other words, if in general elections an incumbent loses simply because his party loses, this should have no affect on superintendent involuntary turnover as demonstrated in hypotheses 2a. But an incumbent's loss during a primary reflects on his own operation while in office and has nothing to do with

whether or not his party wins the general election. Thus one would expect greater significance to appear in hypotheses 2a than in 2b. While the null hypotheses in 2b was rejected, the confidence level was not as great as that in hypotheses 2d. Incumbent defeat during a primary was not more strongly related to superintendent, involuntary turnover than the general catagory of incumbent defeat. The expected affect of partisonism was not demonstrated.

Following the same line of reasoning, we predicted that if an incumbent won his primary and his party won the general election, and if he personally was defeated in the general election, thus should mean considerable local disfavor with his operation in office and therefore be very strongly related to involuntary superintendent turnover. Hypotheses 2c tested this notion. Again the null hypotheses was rejected but with less confidence than hypotheses 2d. In other words, the partison effect was weaker than simple incumbent defeat related to involuntary turnover.

Of considerable interest then is the auxillary finding tested in hypotheses 2d. The general catagory incumbent defeat (without partison subclassification) had strongest relationship to involuntary superintendent turnover. When only districts experiencing superintendent turnover were analyzed, the relationship between incumbent defeat and involuntary turnover increased to a significant level of .001, matching that found in the original nonpartison elections. Thus this relationship was the same and was apparently unaffected by the partison nature of school board elections in Pennsylvania.

Discussion

For some time the senior author of this paper has contended that placing the politics of education squarely in the partison political

arena would make politicians and their parties more accountable for educational outcomes and, therefore, more responsive to educational demands. It was argued that if the party was responsible for formulating an education plank and then for keeping its promises at national, state and local levels, education would be forced into the position of political attention and consideration it deserves. Politicians could no longer duck responsibility for education if they as Republicans or Democrats were responsible for the development of educational policy.

Apparently this is not so. The data gathered in this study indicate that partisonism will affect the number of Democrats or Republicans elected to a school board in any particular area. But once elected, education again becomes a non-partison activity. There is little political coverage in education as pointed out by Masters.[10] Evidently no party wants to take the credit or blame for ousting a local superintendent. For that matter, the same appears true at the national level where we see bi-partison support for antibussing legislation. If there is a partison nature in the politics of education, it is much more subtle than that. Perhaps in such things as appointments to the Supreme Court or Committee chairmanships but not in the support or lack of it in avert political education bills that seem to have some ground swell support at the grass roots level. Politicians steer clear of partisonism in educational matters. And we let them get away with it!

1. Allen W. Moen, "Superintendent Turnover As Predicted by School Board Incumbent Defeat In Pennsylvania's Partison Elections," (Ph.D. dissertation, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University) 1971.

2. Frank W. Lutz, "Social Systems and School Districts (unpublished doctoral dissertation, St. Louis: Washington University) 1962.

3. Raymond E. Callahan, Education and the Cult of Efficiency, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) 1962.

4. John C. Walden, "School Board Changes and Involuntary Superintendent Turnover," (Ph.D. dissertation, Claremont Graduate School) 1966.

5. Lawrence Iannacconi and Frank W. Lutz, Politics, Power and Policy: The Study of a Local School Board, (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishers) 1970.

6. Ibid., p. 175.

7. Op cit., Allen W. Moen.

8. Ibid., (Appendix A).

9. Edward C. Banfield and James Q. Wilson, City Politics (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press and M.I.T. Press) 1963.

10. Nicholas A. Masters, et. al., State Politics and the Public Schools (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.) 1964.